



---

Barber, Fionna (2018) Performative Self-Portraiture, Femmage, and Feminist Histories of Irish Art: Amanda Coogan's Snails, after Alice Maher (2010). *Etudes Irlandaises*, 43 (1). ISSN 2259-8863

---

**Downloaded from:** <https://e-space.mmu.ac.uk/621297/>

**Publisher:** Presses universitaires de Rennes

**DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.4000/etudesirlandaises.5531>

Please cite the published version

**Performative Self-Portraiture, *Femme* and Feminist Histories of Irish Art: Amanda Coogan's *Snails, after Alice Maher* (2010)**

Abstract

In 2010 Amanda Coogan's *Snails: after Alice Maher* was performed in front of an audience at the Irish Museum of Modern Art. The two-hour performance, during which the artist stood motionless as a number of snails explored her face, body and hair, engaged with concerns of spectacle, abjection and female identity now familiar from Coogan's practice. The artist has also explicitly acknowledged the relationship between self-portraiture and the use of the body in performance art; *Snails* investigates this territory through aspects of both the staging of the performance and its subsequent documentation. However a further significant aspect of this piece is its acknowledgment of the earlier work of Alice Maher, whether in terms of similar concerns with abjection and identity or the role of both the art historical canon and the representation of the self. In this paper the acknowledgment of feminist precedent is investigated through the notion of *femme*, a term here appropriated to signify the recognition of the influential role of earlier women practitioners, yet here identified also as situated within a history of the politics of the Irish female body since the 1980s. This frames a discussion of the significance of self-portraiture within Coogan's performative practice through in two earlier works *Medea* (2001) and *Self-Portrait as David* (2003). Her practice is subsequently situated in relation to a gendered critique of the role of self-portraiture within the development of art historical canons, returning to a reading of *Snails* in relation to further precedents for feminist deconstructions of the idealised female body through self-representation in the work of Frida Kahlo and Hannah Wilke. Finally the discussion engages with Kristeva's notion of "women's time" to propose a means of reconceptualising factors of influence and affirmation between women artists that cannot be recognised within the canon, concluding with discussion of works by Alice Maher as precedent for Coogan's performative self-portraiture, and which also operate within the kind of signifying space proposed by

Kristeva, an investigative process that suggests further possibilities for the writing of Irish feminist art histories.

**Keywords:**

Self-portraiture, performance, *femmage*, Irish feminist art, canonicity, feminist body politics

In 2010 Amanda Coogan's *Snails, after Alice Maher* was performed in front of an audience at the Irish Museum of Modern Art (IMMA) in Dublin (**Fig.1**)<sup>1</sup>. For two hours the artist stood motionless behind a screen within which a window had been cut to reveal her upper torso and head, deliberately framing the artist's body in the manner of a self-portrait. Throughout the long duration of the performance, Coogan's skin and hair became the ground on which the snails left trails of slime, glistening even more where they had picked up traces of the gold paint across her upper chest. Displayed on the opposite wall of the gallery, however, were two intaglio prints by Alice Maher, *Double Drawing* (**Fig.2**) and *Fever Bush* from a series entitled *The Snail Chronicles* (2005). These images combined drawings by Maher with trails left by live snails, their coloured slime resulting from the diet of vegetable dyes with which they had previously been fed. The relationship of these prints to the performance is integral to its meaning, and not just in the acknowledgement made in the work's title; Maher's work provided a focus for Coogan's gaze during a piece that, despite her familiarity with themes of spectacle and the abject, still proved challenging to perform<sup>2</sup>. However it is the implications of this performance and the wider context of its meanings that this essay investigates, in relation to the issues raised by women's self-portraiture, the construction of gendered artistic canons and the politics of the female body.

***Snails and femmage***

---

<sup>1</sup> *Snails, After Alice Maher* was performed at IMMA on 16 June 2010 as part of the opening event for the *Altered Images* exhibition 17 June – 15 August 2010.

<sup>2</sup> Conversation with Amanda Coogan, 7 February 2013; email from Coogan to the author 17 August 2016

Writing about live events such as Amanda Coogan's *Snails, after Alice Maher* in relation to self-portraiture means engaging with a performance that took place some years ago, and at which I was not present. This means a reliance on other sources, primarily the photographic documentation of the performance. However, as Amelia Jones has said of her own experience in writing about performances which she could not have observed personally, although the live event has its own "specificity", this should also "not be privileged over the specificity of knowledges that develop in relation to the documentary traces of such an event"<sup>3</sup>. It is often only retrospectively that the significance of the live performance can be situated within a variety of cultural contexts which will help to further expand its meaning. And photographs or video do not just passively record the ephemerality of the live event – they are also active agents of the construction of its significance. These are observations that can also apply to the relationship between the use of the body in performance art and the role of self-portraiture. *Snails, after Alice Maher* makes this relationship explicit equally through aspects of the *mise en scène* of the performance and its accompanying documentation, both of which borrow the conventions of the portrait to frame the representation of the artist contained within.

Coogan's use of her body in performance has in the past involved a direct critique of the gendering of canons of radical art practice through reference to Duchamp, Nauman or Manzoni. In its titling, however, *Snails* explicitly acknowledges two projects by another Irish woman artist: both the *Snail Chronicles*, and Maher's earlier *Portraits* (2003). There are affinities between the work of both Coogan and Maher in their committed deconstruction of representations of femininity in addition to related concerns not just with issues of abjection and identity. However a further feature of the practice of both artists is a critical engagement with the art historical canon as the prime means of ordering and giving selective value to art practice in historical terms. In its recognition of the formative role of Maher's work in relation to her own, Coogan's *Snails* on one level can be read as an act of

---

<sup>3</sup> Amelia Jones , " "Presence" in Absentia: Experiencing Performance as Documentation", *Art Journal* 56:4, Winter 1997, p.12

*femmage*, a term that I use here to identify the acknowledgement of precedent, and active celebration of the work of one woman artist by another <sup>4</sup>. This process of paying tribute in turn opens onto questions around the role of gender within the artistic canon – and ultimately the role of self-portraiture within canon formation. Yet there is also the issue of *how* we might acknowledge patterns of a commonality of interest. And although we can substitute ‘art’ for ‘writing’ in her account, how does the attempt to position women artists in a temporal relation to each other resonate with the configuration identified by Teresa de Lauretis in her discussion of the formation of a “genealogy of women” as “a scattered, fragmented and yet historically embodied lineage of female thought and writing”?<sup>5</sup>.

### **Performance, self-portraiture and abjection**

*Snails: after Alice Maher* engages with themes of spectacle, abjection and female identity now familiar from the practice that Amanda Coogan has developed since her training with Marina Abramović, one of the key figures in the development of performance art since the 1970s <sup>6</sup>. Yet Coogan is also identified as being part of a generation of Irish feminist practitioners of live art whose work builds on the earlier examples of women’s art practice as it emerged in Ireland during the 1980s <sup>7</sup>. Although their practice took different

---

<sup>4</sup> The term “femmage” was first used by American feminist artist Miriam Schapiro in the 1970s to apply to artworks made by women that used materials associated with the historically female-associated area of the home, combined through a process of collage. However Schapiro’s notion of femmage also involved an explicit acknowledgement of the role of earlier women practitioners as influential precedents, and it is in this sense that I use the term here. See Norma Broude, “Miriam Schapiro and “Femmage”: Reflections on the Conflict between Decoration and Abstraction in Twentieth-Century Art,” *Arts Magazine*, February 1980, pp.83-87

<sup>5</sup> Teresa de Lauretis, “Feminist Genealogies: A Personal Itinerary” *Women’s Studies International Forum*, Vol. 16, No. 4, 1993, p.402

<sup>6</sup> Coogan initially studied with Abramović on the Masters programme at the Hochschule für Bildende Kunst, Braunschweig, Germany 1999-2001 and has worked with her on several projects subsequently including *The Life and Death of Marina Abramović*, Manchester International Festival, 9-16 July 2011

<sup>7</sup> Helena Walsh, “Developing Dialogues: Live Art and Femininity in Post-Conflict Ireland”, in Áine Phillips ed. *Performance Art in Ireland: a History*, Live Art Development Agency, London and Intellect, Bristol, 2015, pp.208-243

forms, fundamental concerns with female identity and the politics of the female body in the work of artists such as Dorothy Cross, Alice Maher, Alanna O'Kelly or Louise Walsh were shaped within a context of feminist outrage and activism around the suppression of female sexuality through the collusion of state and church, highlighted in events such as the death of Ann Lovett in 1984<sup>8</sup>. Yet in a post-millennial context many of the same issues surrounding the Irish female body still remain unresolved, with the survival of archaic and punitive legislation outlawing abortion and a continued moral stigma attached to female sexuality. Within the space of the feminist performance art that has evolved since the 1970s the body becomes denaturalised through ritual, gesture or a violation of cultural taboos. As Valérie Morisson suggests, the intention is to 'shake the audience's perceptions of femininity, whether it is perceived as womanhood, femalehood, or motherhood'. As such the body in performance has become a 'locus of resistance' to repressive practices that secure the regulation of femininity within a patriarchal culture<sup>9</sup>. Coogan's *Snails: After Alice Maher* on the surface of it may appear to be less directly engaged with the politics of the Irish female body than some of her other performances. Yet Coogan's act of *femmage* embodied through performative self-portraiture in *Snails* does not take place outside of history – in this case the still only partially visible history of Irish women's struggles to control their own sexuality and identity that also informed the development of Maher's own practice.

In performance, the body becomes an active source of the production of meaning in the work, a fundamentally different premise from representational conventions associated with self-portraiture. This, by comparison, is a genre that continues to maintain a canonical value in a culture that celebrates the achievements of the individual, just as, historically,

---

<sup>8</sup> Ann Lovett was a fifteen-year-old schoolgirl who died giving birth to a child (who also died) in a grotto to the Virgin Mary in Granard, Co. Longford on 31 January 1984. People in Granard claimed to have no knowledge of the girl's condition, and her death came only four months after the adoption of Eighth Amendment to the Constitution, enshrining the right to life of the unborn child over that of the mother, was approved in a controversial referendum.

<sup>9</sup> Valérie Morisson, 'Women's Art in Ireland and Poland 1970-2010: Experiencing and Experimenting on the Female Body', *Etudes Irlandaises* 37:2, 2012, p.82

it has also worked to secure gender difference. Hence any relationship between performance and self-portraiture is likely to be problematic, as Coogan acknowledged in a presentation in 2011 at a seminar on Irish portraiture at the National Gallery of Ireland. Accompanied at this point by an image from the documentation of *Snails* she stated that

For Performance Art the question of works as Self Portraits is a complicated one. For my practice I do not make self-portraits but I do use the body, my body, as the central axis of the work, exploring the body- its limits and its place in our investigation of living <sup>10</sup>.

The realm of personal experience and autobiography still maintain an important role in generating meanings for the work, yet in Coogan's practice these become mediated through the work of her body in order to reach out to a wider audience:

A starting point is often from a place of knowing (a personal history) and then expands that seed and takes on a myriad of influences, the final piece of work is ready or finished when it can stand alone, it becomes universal, and be read in a myriad of ways by the audience/viewer <sup>11</sup>.

The staging of the body through gesture, spectacle, and the generation of affect are all strategies shaping the reception of the work by its viewers. Coogan's performances are both haptic and visual rather than verbal, which has its roots in her own personal circumstances. Born as a hearing child to deaf parents, she first learnt to communicate through Irish Sign Language 'a manual/visual one that demands live encounter'<sup>12</sup>. Rather than being verbally articulated this is an embodied language, communicating through the visual

---

<sup>10</sup> Amanda Coogan, *The Role of the Subject and the Artist in the context of a self-portrait*, Portraits of the Irish Face - National Gallery of Ireland, unpublished seminar notes 26/2/2011, non.pag.

<sup>11</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> *ibid.*

perception of performative gesture. In addition, an awareness of the marginalisation of deaf people within a hearing society also became a catalyst for the development of a knowledge of other areas of discrimination and oppression highlighted within many of Coogan's performances <sup>13</sup>.

This nuanced relationship between autobiography, performance and self-portraiture in Amanda Coogan's practice becomes apparent in a work such as *Medea*, (**Fig.3**) performed in 2001 at IMMA as part of the *Marking the Territory* event curated by Marina Abramović (19-21 October 2001). A photograph shows Coogan wearing a sumptuous blue evening dress and reclining on a chaise longue, the suggested decadence of her pose conflicting with her confrontational gaze towards the viewer. The performance itself used Irish Sign Language to detail instances of institutionalised abuse and oppression experienced by members of the deaf community in Ireland. Revelations of the destroyed childhoods of deaf victims of abuse in the institutions run by the church on behalf of the Irish state were beginning to emerge shortly before the performance of *Medea* <sup>14</sup>. Yet *Medea*'s story itself derives from Greek mythology. A strong and beautiful woman who suffers a terrible fate, the reputation of her intelligence and resourcefulness are superseded by the "unnatural" murder of her own children in revenge for betrayal by her husband Jason.

In the photograph of *Medea*, her idealised beauty is undermined by the visible presence of a dark transgressive stain spreading from her crotch across the blue satin of her dress. This is a recurring theme in Coogan's practice: the undoing of constructions of feminine beauty through the workings of the abject. Deriving mainly from Julia Kristeva's *Powers of Horror* (1980) the interpretation of abjection in art practice is as something transgressive, frequently involving the presence of bodily functions that usually remain

---

<sup>13</sup> See for example Kate Antosik Parsons' discussion of Coogan's performance *Yellow* in the context of the Magdalen Laundries in "Bodily Remembrances: The Performance of Memory in Recent Works by Amanda Coogan", *Artefact: the Journal of the Irish Association of Art Historians*, Issue 3, 2009, pp.7-19

<sup>14</sup> Although its findings were not published until 2009 in the Ryan Report, the Commission to Inquire into Child Abuse set up in 2000 uncovered evidence of sexual abuse at St. Joseph's School for Deaf Boys, Cabra, and severe emotional abuse at the girls' school St. Mary's Cabra.



hidden, and as such has proved to be particularly valuable for feminist artists engaged with the deconstruction of the idealised female body<sup>15</sup>. Yet in Coogan's *Medea* the terrifying power of the murderous mother takes on a further significance in relation to the long history of the personification of Ireland as female<sup>16</sup>. In the further context of the revelations around institutionalised abuse, *Medea* makes visible Mother Ireland's devastating destruction of her own children. Significantly it is a photograph of this performance, the trace that remains within the materials of documentation, that represents Coogan in Ireland's National Self-Portrait Collection in Limerick, signifying her role not just as an artist, but in identification with, and advocacy for, the deaf community in Ireland.

### **The Self-Portrait as Critique of the Canon**

Self-portraiture has additionally figured within Coogan's work as a means of subversion of the artistic canon's incorporation and perpetuation of normative gender roles. The photograph *Self-Portrait as David* (2003) (**Fig.4**) parodies Michelangelo's iconic sculpture; instead of the idealised marble body on its elevated plinth in the Uffizi, Coogan stands on a concrete slab in her back garden in Dublin wearing a plastic apron imprinted with the statue's torso. In not only appropriating a tourist souvenir but superimposing Michelangelo's embodiment of idealised masculinity on her own individual female body Coogan's photograph transgresses the border between high and low culture, deflating the canonical assumption of male genius that has also historically relegated women to the domestic sphere of the kitchen rather than the artist's studio. This is an irreverence compounded both by the work's title, and her own role in controlling the camera's shutter release, and thus the means of representation itself.

The subversive implications signified by this photograph become more apparent with a consideration of the historical role of self-portraiture within the formation of the artistic canon. Self-portraiture has been a feature of artistic practice since classical times and also features in surviving art of the medieval

---

<sup>15</sup> Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: an essay on abjection*, Columbia University Press, New York, 1982

<sup>16</sup> Belinda Loftus, *Mother Ireland and William III*, Picture Press, Dundrum: 1990

period, however it is generally acknowledged as becoming increasingly prevalent during the Renaissance. A new emphasis on naturalism was supported by technological developments that included advances in the production of mirrors capable of providing an accurate reflection. This encouraged artists to demonstrate their ability to produce a true likeness, but the growth of self-portraiture was also bound up with other factors. At a time of increased secular patronage in addition to that of the church it could represent a demonstration of the artist's social standing as an independent producer. During the patronage of such key figures as Lorenzo de Medici in late fifteenth century Florence the focus on the unique achievements of the individual developed into a celebration of heroism, both in commissioned portraiture and in artists' representations of themselves. In the second edition of Vasari's *Lives of the Artists* in 1568 the artistic biographies were accompanied by engraved self-portraits, some of which were distinctly speculative. Their inclusion was one factor that, in conjunction with Vasari's insistence on the artist as unique creative genius, also helped to secure the status of those artists whose biographies were included within the formation of a highly selective yet authoritative canon of great art.

Self-portraiture subsequently took on other areas of significance, such as a symbolic or allegorical function, or the later Romantic fascination with the misunderstood artist as set apart from society that fed into the development of Bohemianism in the early nineteenth century. Yet it is during the Renaissance that a central, enduring contradiction of self-portraiture becomes visible for the first time: the tension between the belief that what we see on the canvas reveals something of the artist's true self, and an awareness of the processes of representation – line and colour, the moulding of form, that make this possible. As Laura Cumming observes, this is a “sense of coming face to face with another person before that person reverts to an image”<sup>17</sup>.

Yet there is a further complication to this model in terms of gender. The sixteenth century Italian painter Sophonisba Anguissola was renowned for the number of self-portraits that she painted throughout her career, yet, historically, women's engagement with this mode of representation has been

---

<sup>17</sup> Laura Cumming, *A Face to the World: on Self Portraits*, HarperPress, London, 2010, p. 6

on different terms to their male counterparts, even though they may have similar concerns in the demonstration of skill, or representation of professional status. The containment of women's lives largely to the domestic sphere and a focus on their reproductive capabilities rather than the production of cultural artefacts has meant that a woman artist was perceived as going against her 'natural' function, and, as a result her abilities and achievements could only be regarded as derivative from male artists. This was a view promoted by Vasari when discussing the four women he actually included in his *Lives*, and which has helped to secure women's exclusion from and marginalisation within the canons of art history <sup>18</sup>.

A self-portrait by a woman artist, then, meant that the assertion of her skill and professionalism was being made in the face of her exceptionality, her status as an anomaly within the wider artistic world where conditions of patronage, consumption and display were, on the whole, determined by men. As Frances Borzello points out, painting self-portraits "meant reconciling the conflict between what society expected of women and what they expected of artists", expectations that were "diametrically opposed"<sup>19</sup>. Women artists adopted a range of different strategies in their negotiation of these contradictions, which were in any case further mediated not only by contemporary constructions and expectations of femininity but also through current modes of representation.

In the Irish artist Helen Mabel Trevor's *Self Portrait with Cap, Smock and Palette*, (**Fig.5**) painted right at the end of the nineteenth century when she was in her sixties, her professional identity, rather than adherence to cultural conventions of femininity, is in no doubt. The solidity of her body is contained within a practical painting smock, yet she also wears a blue cap tied loosely beneath her chin. This feminised version of the male bohemian artist's beret and cravat, combined with the large palette at the foreground of the painting, unequivocally states her identity as a painter – although one who

---

<sup>18</sup> Vasari included discussion of Sophonisba Anguissola, Madonna Lucrezia and Plautilla Nelli in addition to the sculptor Properzia di Rossi.

<sup>19</sup> Frances Borzello, *Seeing Ourselves: Women's Self-Portraits*, London, Thames and Hudson, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition 2016, p.35

has to modify the normative signifiers of artistic dress in her own self-representation in order to highlight the importance of her gender as part of this identification. Trevor painted this self-portrait at some point in the 1890s when she was living in Paris; that she was regularly exhibiting in the annual Salon and sending work to the Royal Academy in London is evidence of her degree of professional recognition<sup>20</sup>. Both the directness of her gaze, and the unflinching assertion that this is the face of an older woman, are also marks of Trevor's engagement with an informal painterly naturalism that she had learnt in the studio of Carolus-Duran and which she applied to a range of subjects from her extended visits to Brittany and Normandy, including numerous paintings of peasant women.

One of the features of Helen Mabel Trevor's self portrait, with its close attention to details of her appearance, is an invitation to read this image as a depiction of her as both artist but also as a person, in that manner that Cummin suggests. This is far removed from the effect of either *Snails* or *Medea*, but what it *does* do is to identify a historical precedent of an Irish painter intervening in the conventions of self-portraiture and subtly altering them in order to depict herself as both woman and artist. It also serves as a reminder that these nuanced engagements with self-portraiture are aligned with a fragmentary and partial history of women artists' continuing efforts to modify the this form of representation in order to articulate something of their own interests, the shifting circumstances of their own lives.

### **The unknowable self and the politics of the female body**

In particular, Amanda Coogan's work can be linked to strategies used in women artists' intervention in the genre of self-portraiture initially apparent in early to mid twentieth century avant-gardes and still continuing to play a role in more recent art practice. The features of parody, fragmentation and montage in Claude Cahun's photographic self-portraits in the 1920s or, slightly later, the relentless staging of her own identity in the paintings of Frida Kahlo, are in different ways symptomatic of modernist concerns with the

---

<sup>20</sup> Julian Campbell 'Helen Mabel Trevor', in Nicola Figgis ed. *Painting 1600-1900*, Dublin, The Royal Irish Academy, 2014, 477-478

formation of the self. Yet in the work of both artists a persistent interrogation of femininity means that the female self, far from being revealed by these processes, actually becomes unknowable. These are tendencies re-emerging in aspects of feminist art practice during the 1970s, notably the work of American artists Cindy Sherman and Hannah Wilke who was also an important figure in the development of feminist performance at the time - a form of practice additionally unrecognised within the canons of 'high art' from which women were largely excluded.

In Coogan's practice there is a clear lineage from the work of Marina Abramović since its inception in the 1970s in her involvement with long durational performances that place considerable demands on both performer and viewer, in addition to a concern with the confrontational strategies of the abject. Yet the memorable imagery of *Snails*, with Coogan's face dotted by molluscs as they made their slow transit across her skin and into her hair evokes a further precedent in Hannah Wilke's *SOS – Starification Object Series* (1974). This was a series of performances also commemorated in photographs in which pieces of gum chewed by her audience were moulded by the artist into tiny vulvas, which she then attached to the surface of her face and body. The parodic nature of the pinup poses adopted by Wilke during these performances was seen as deeply problematic in relation to paramount feminist concerns in the 1970s with a resistance to the objectification of the female body by the male gaze<sup>21</sup>. In the light of Coogan's *Snails*, however, the *Starification Object Series* becomes increasingly legible as an earlier attempt to deconstruct female identity through the conflicting factors of spectacle and abjection.

The snails' unhurried journey across Coogan's skin also suggests the possibility of further readings for the piece with a pressing contemporary significance that are in turn triggered by their suggestion of another earlier precedent within women's self-representation. In 1932 the Mexican artist Frida Kahlo had accompanied her husband the muralist Diego Rivera to

---

<sup>21</sup> Feminist critic Lucy Lippard accused Wilke of a "confusion of her roles as beautiful woman and artist, as flirt and feminist". L. Lippard, "European and American Women's Body Art", in *From the Centre: Feminist Essays on Women's Art*, New York, E.P. Dutton, 1976, p.126

Detroit where he was working on a commission. While she was there she began to suffer a miscarriage and was taken to Henry Ford Hospital where she eventually lost the baby. This devastating event, during which Kahlo nearly bled to death, also followed a failed abortion and is commemorated in the painting *Henry Ford Hospital* (1932) (**Fig.6**). Kahlo depicts her own nude body lying on a hospital bed in a pool of uterine blood, in one hand holding cords that link to several iconic images derived from medical textbooks<sup>22</sup>. These include both a foetus and a cross-section of the female reproductive system, yet there is also a snail that symbolises the slow progress of the miscarriage. In common with Kahlo's practice in *Henry Ford Hospital*, Amanda Coogan's engagement with the abject frequently makes visible materials and fluids more usually concealed within the female body; her earlier performance *Fountain*, involved the artist urinating in public in front of an audience at IMMA, yet it was also directly informed by her knowledge of the case of Ann Lovett, dying with her baby after giving birth alone in a public place. Reading *Snails* through Kahlo's *Henry Ford Hospital* situates Coogan's practice in relation to earlier precedents of transgressive self-portraiture by women, but this connection also serves as reminder of the continuing debates around the politics of reproduction in Ireland, with the continued illegality of abortion – even in cases of miscarriage when the mother's life is at risk<sup>23</sup>.

### **Women's Time and Irish Women Artists**

An increasingly fragmentary and contingent notion of the self as articulated through a critical engagement with self-representation is one that also figures prominently in contemporary feminism. This is most notable in Judith Butler's theories of gender performativity, in which a sense of the self is enacted by individuals in relation to a shifting range of cultural "frameworks of intelligibility"

---

<sup>22</sup> Gannit Ankori, "Frida Kahlo: the Fabric of her Art" in Emma Dexter and Tanya Barson eds. *Frida Kahlo*, Tate Publishing, London, 2005, pp.32-34

<sup>23</sup> As in the death of Savita Halappanavar, who died of a septic miscarriage in University College Hospital Galway on 28 October 2012 after she was denied an abortion that would have saved her life.

that provide a coherent sense of gender identity<sup>24</sup>. Within this context a feminist performative self-portraiture, such as that found in Coogan's work, thus becomes less about the expression of a stable, unified identity, and more about the articulation of a fluid, changing sense of being, enacted through female embodiment and in relation to a range of earlier representations. Yet the dominant mode of communicating transitions between past and present within art history relies upon the hierarchical value system of the canon, from which women are generally excluded, or, on the occasions where they are included, their achievements neutralised and contained. A further feature of canonicity is a focus on progressive development, where the achievements of earlier artists are either to be mined for their influence, or else surpassed by the work of their successors. Feminist art historians such as Griselda Pollock have argued for the necessity to create new configurations that indicate a relationship between past and present without merely inserting women into a canon which does not represent their interests<sup>25</sup>. Unlike her two other projects engaged with self-portraiture - *Medea* or *David* - Coogan's performance *Snails* explicitly acknowledges a relationship with the work of another Irish woman artist. If this is the type of relationship that cannot be accommodated within canonical art history, how else might we conceptualise the factors of influence and affirmation between women as producers of culture?

In her essay "Women's Time", Julia Kristeva began to explore generational relationships between different moments of feminist activity through an investigation initially of different modes of the representation of time<sup>26</sup>. Yet what is particularly notable is that these relationships figure not so much as sequential developments but in spatial terms: for Kristeva the "use of the word 'generation' implies less a chronology than a *signifying space*, a both

---

<sup>24</sup> Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, New York, Routledge, 1990

<sup>25</sup> Griselda Pollock, *Differencing the Canon: Feminist Desire and the Writing of Art's Histories*, London and New York, Routledge 1999

<sup>26</sup> Julia Kristeva, "Women's Time" (1979), trans. Alice Jardine and Harry Blake, in Toril Moi ed. *The Julia Kristeva Reader*, Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1986, pp.187-213

corporeal and desiring mental space”<sup>27</sup>. To conceptualise the relationships of commonality, difference and acknowledgement between women artists in spatial terms opens up new ways of productively visualising the links between them. Yet despite the exciting possibilities of this approach the authority of the canon cannot also be dismissed; to do so is to relegate women to the margins of history once more. There is scope for an Irish feminist art history that acknowledges a more complex and nuanced relationship between both the role of the canon as a discursive formation of cultural value and productive signifying spaces in which other relationships between women artists can be made visible. This also returns to the question of how we negotiate Teresa de Lauretis’ identification of the discontinuous and fragmentary lineage of women’s thought that I raised earlier.

### **Alice Maher – *Snail Chronicles* and *Portraits***

So what was it that Coogan’s *Snails* performance responded to in Maher’s work, and how might this encounter be framed in terms of wider questions of the role of self-portraiture in feminist histories and creative relationships between women? On the other side of the gallery where *Snails* was performed were two prints by Alice Maher – *Double Drawing* and *Fever Bush*. Although both were part of Maher’s *Snail Chronicles* collection it is the former that has the most significance for a reading of Amanda Coogan’s performative self-portraiture in this instance. In *Double Drawing* two figures of indeterminate sex are shown facing each other, their upper torsos and faces outlined in brown ink, although the lower part of their bodies are obscured by an abstract cloudlike shape, the residue of the snails’ transit across the surface. Each figure reaches out towards the other with a pencil or stick that appears to be delineating the hair that covers their faces <sup>28</sup>.

In Maher’s *Double Drawing* the bodies of the two figures not only transgress the borders between human and animal in figurative terms; their

---

<sup>27</sup> *ibid.* p.209

<sup>28</sup> In keeping with Maher’s interest in both art historical reference and the fluidity of boundaries between animal and human these figures are reminiscent of Renaissance portraits of sufferers of hypertrichosis, such as the family of Pedro Gonzales, the so-called “Wolf Man”, whose daughters Antonietta and Madeleine also suffered from the same condition.



apparent androgyny also echoes the hermaphroditism of the snails, whose trace is left in billowing forms and abstract marks. This is the product of a collaborative process that goes beyond human agency alone – Maher has talked about wanting to ‘work *with* the snails’ in the making of these images<sup>29</sup>. A similar collaboration is involved in Coogan’s performance, created through the interaction of static human performer and the active progress of the snails moving across her skin, picking up smears of gold pigment as they go, a process she has described as “painterly”<sup>30</sup>.

Yet there are further points of reference in Maher’s earlier work for Coogan’s use of the abject within her performative self-portraiture, specifically in a further photograph associated with the IMMA performance which shows Coogan’s head and shoulders in strict profile (**Fig. 7**) once more covered by the snails that explore her face and hair. In her series *Portraits* (2003), Maher staged her own representation in a series of photographs that used a range of found natural materials as accessories to destabilise any sense of the knowable self. Some of these are distinctly abject, such as the necklace of lambs’ hearts against her bare skin in *Collar*. A further image, *Helmet*, (**Fig.8**) depicts the artist in profile, her face buried in a mask of snail shells that, although supported by her hands, appears to extrude from the surface of her skin. An elision of boundaries between human and non-human that also precedes *Double Drawing*, the perverse hybridity of this representation is indicated in Carol Mavor’s description of ‘a beautiful-woman slug who has built her fantastic face-fortress from the saliva that oozes from her monster-girl mouth’<sup>31</sup>.

The static profile pose of *Helmet* is directly appropriated from Renaissance Italian portraiture, where in turn it derived from the celebration of individual heroism on commemorative medals. Maher was particularly struck by its use in portraits of women and also that these were predominantly painted and commissioned by men, frequently to commemorate a wedding or betrothal. Given the relative lack of such portraits by female artists, one of

<sup>29</sup> Alice Maher, audio guide to the *Snails Chronicles: Double Image* available from the *Altered Images* website: <http://www.alteredimages.ie/downloads.html> accessed 30 August 2016.

<sup>30</sup> Amanda Coogan, conversation with the author, 7 February 2013

<sup>31</sup> Carol Mavor, “A Dream of A House”, *Alice Maher: Portraits*, Millennium Court Arts Centre, Portadown, 2003, non.pag.

Maher's aims was to address this discontinuous history of representations of women by making her own images – with herself as subject in the finished series. The original *mise en scène* of the finished *Portraits*, however, emerged through a process of play and experimentation between both Maher and the actor Olwen Fouéré, while the photographs themselves were shot in the studio of Kate Horgan, a professional portrait photographer. Behind the surface of these photographs, then, is a hidden set of productive relationships between women, actively shaping the meanings of images at an earlier stage through processes of reciprocity and exchange.

### **Conclusion: the space between then and now**

In Amanda Coogan's *Snails, after Alice Maher*, self-portraiture and performance combine to create a signifying space within which relationships of acknowledgement and celebration between women artists are enacted. A distinctive feature of signifying spaces is to open up a gap where meaning is constructed, which in turn helps to reconfigure processes of temporal change. The titling of the piece itself acknowledges this temporal dimension and also preserves the activity of each artist as discrete, despite the aspects that they have in common. Looking at the associations between these works by both Amanda Coogan and Alice Maher is a process that brings into visibility not only the relationship between self-portraiture and women's (art) history, but the lineage of women's art practice in relation to the politics of the Irish female body. And it is also through the operation of a further signifying space, the discursive domain of writing about the engagement between the work of these two artists, that new productive interactions can be explored. And this, in turn, can lead into new ways of thinking – and articulating – the temporal configurations of creative relationships between Irish women artists, in the writing of new histories.

## Images

1. Amanda Coogan, *Snails, after Alice Maher*, performance still, Irish Museum of Modern Art (IMMA) Dublin 16 June 2010
2. Alice Maher, *Double Drawing* from *The Snail Chronicles*, 2005, intaglio print 53 x 49.5 cm, Collection South Tipperary County Council
3. Amanda Coogan, *Medea*, performance still, IMMA 2001
4. Amanda Coogan, *Self-Portrait as David*, photograph 2003
5. Helen Mabel Trevor, *Self-portrait*, 1890s Oil on Canvas 66 x 55 cm, National Gallery of Ireland, Dublin, Miss R. Trevor Gift 1900
6. Frida Kahlo, *Henry Ford Hospital* 1932, Coll. Dolores Olmedo, Mexico City
7. Amanda Coogan, *Snails, after Alice Maher*, performance still 2009
8. Alice Maher, *Helmet*, 2003, Lambda Print 61 x 61cm.



Fig. 1



Fig. 2



Fig. 3



Fig. 4





Fig. 5



Fig. 6



Fig. 7



Fig. 8